

# Far Away but So Close to the Heart LooChoo (Ryukyuan) Language: Revitalization Movement in Hawai'i\*

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Out of approximately 7,000 estimated languages in the world, about 10 percent of them have fewer than ten speakers remaining (The Endangered Languages Project). Researchers have indicated that without efforts to revive them, not only these 10 percent but approximately half of all languages will become extinct within this century (Grenoble and Whaley 2006, Harrison 2007). With such linguistic situation becoming clearer and increasingly more attention has been paid to language endangerment, in 2009, UNESCO designated LooChoo languages as endangered languages (Mosley 2010). This paper concerns the efforts by the Okinawan diaspora to revitalize LooChoo languages in Hawai'i by illuminating three interrelated activities; 1) monthly LooChoo language and culture workshops conducted at University of Hawai'i at Hilo, 2) annual LooChoo identity conferences, and 3) series of education tours to Okinawa for the residents of Hawai'i and the mainland US.

**Keywords:** LooChoo, Ryukyuan languages, language shift, revitalization, Hawai'i, Okinawa, diaspora

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## 1. Brief historical background

Language shift is a lengthy process involving various psychological, sociological, and political components. One of the earliest factors affecting the shift in Okinawa was the establishment of *kaiwa denshūjo* 'conversation academy' in 1880 by the Japanese government which was a school to train future teachers and interpreters

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between Okinawan and Japanese (cf. Clarke 2012, Kondo 1993, Yoshimura 2013). About 130 years later in 2009, UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger listed eight endangered languages in Japan in which six were Ryukyuan languages. According to the Atlas, Yonaguni and Yaeyama are severely endangered while Miyako, Okinawa, Kunigami, and Amami are designated as "definitely endangered" (Mosley 2010). Heinrich (2007) asserted that inter-generational transmission was interrupted in the 1950's and now we find people above the age of 70 or 75 to be fluent speakers and those aged 50 and over to have some comprehensive ability with a sharp decline for younger people. Some estimated that these Ryukyuan languages will vanish within the next 50 years if concerted efforts are not begun soon (e.g., Read 2011).

Currently there are numerous attempts to strengthen these languages (cf. Heinrich 2018). For instance, Okinawago fukyū kyōgikai 'the Society for Okinawan Language Revitalization' was established in 2000 to promote local language use (see Ohara & Saft 2014, Hara & Heinrich 2015, Ishihara 2016). Other revitalization efforts that have been made in recent years include organizing speech contests, designating shimakutuba nu hi 'Okinawan community language day' in 2006 by Okinawa prefecture, as well as an increasing number of editorials and essays in Okinawan languages published by one of the two newspapers in Okinawa, Okinawa Times. There are other such efforts outside of Okinawa and this paper illuminates efforts taking place in Hawai'i. Unlike the examples that were mentioned above, these efforts are not initiated or run by the government office but are grassroots movements. We will focus on three such efforts, 1) monthly LooChoo ('LooChoo' being the Okinawan pronunciation of 'Ryukyu') language and culture workshops conducted at University of Hawai'i at Hilo, 2) annual LooChoo identity conferences, and 3) series of education trips taken by the residents of Hawai'i and the mainland US to Okinawa.

Before we describe those, it is necessary to mention the special connection between LooChoo and Hawai'i. Immigration of Okinawans to Hawai'i began at the end of the 19th century and today Hawai'i is the oldest and largest diaspora of Okinawans outside of Okinawa (Matsumoto 1982) and approximately 50,000 people in Hawai'i have Okinawan ancestry (Shimada 2012). Therefore, it is not surprising at all to find that there are many Okinawa organizations and associations in the state. United Okinawan Association of Hawaii is one of the largest such organization and it was established in 1951. It was renamed as the Hawaii United Okinawa Association in 1995 and it is the umbrella organization for 50 clubs in the state of Hawai'i. Hui Okinawa and Maui Okinawa Kenjinkai are association member clubs and many of these clubs are area based such as Itoman shijinkai 'association of people from Itoman' and Yomitan club.

There are other organizations and associations outside of the Hawaii United Okinawa Association in Hawai'i and Ukwanshin Kabudan is one of them. It is an O'ahu Okinawan association which is also an Okinawa performing arts troupe working to maintain traditional culture. They organize educational programs to promote cultural awareness and understanding especially among local Okinawans and Okinawans in Japan. Ukwanshin Kabudan has two founding members, Eric Wada and Norman Kaneshiro, and both are master teachers of LooChooan traditional arts. Norman teaches sanshin and Eric teaches traditional Okinawan dance and music and both have been in their respective fields for over twenty years. These two descendants of immigrants to Hawai'i are the main force behind three closely related language and culture revitalization efforts that this paper is focused on.

## 2. LooChoo Studies workshops at University of Hawai'i at Hilo

Once a month, members of Ukwanshin Kabudan, Hui Okinawa, the Hilo community, and students at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo join the LooChoo Studies workshop at Ka Haka 'Ula o Ke'elikōlani College of Hawaiian Language. Eric Wada and Norman Kaneshiro fly in from Honolulu each month as the main instructors for the courses provided in the workshop.

### 2.1. Background

These workshops have been conducted at the Hilo campus since February 2016, and before then at community members' houses since September 2013. Gary Oshiro, one of the organizing members of the workshop, stated that he and his wife used to hold these workshops at their house with about twenty people attending. With the venue changed to Hale 'Ōlelo, attendance grew greatly to over fifty people each month. Hale 'Ōlelo is the Hawaiian language building at University of Hawai'i at Hilo where the internationally recognized revitalization and renormalization of Hawaiian language takes place (Ohara 2016, Wilson 2018). Also, it is well knowing in the field of language revitalization that the Hawaiian language is seen as one of the very few successful cases (Grenoble and Whaley 2006). It was at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo in 1982 that the Hawaiian language was brought back as a medium of instruction into government-funded education, the first time this occurred since the ban of education through the Hawaiian language in 1896. Hawaiian was thought to be one of the first languages within Polynesia to be extinct in the 1980's (Benton 1981), but now it shows some signs of successful revitalization, including an increase in the number of speakers (e.g., Iokepa-Guerrero 2016). It is historically significant to have workshops to aim

revitalizing LooChoo languages and cultures at this venue and faculty members of the Ka Haka 'Ula o Ke'elikōlani are also organizing members of the workshop.

## 2.2. The schedule/contents

Generally, the schedule consists of a morning session in which Eric or Norman (or both) conducts a presentation on a certain topic, such as dance, music, cuisine, social issues, etc. The afternoon session consists of two different classes: the uta-sanshin class, and the uchināguchi class. Often there are additional class for udui (dance) and fwansoo (Okinawan Flute). Alongside all of this is usually a keiki ('child' in Hawaiian) class, so the workshop can work as a sort of daycare while exposing both children and their parents to LooChoo languages and culture. The workshops are generally conducted from 10 am to 4 pm.

## 2.3. The themes

The themes for the workshops vary from linguistic, cultural, historical as well as sociological issues. The themes from February 2016 onward, when the workshops moved to the University campus, are presented below.

February 2016 "Uchināguchi (Okinawan language)"

March 2016 "Okinawa Performing Arts"

April 2016 "Culture and Uchinaaguchi (Okinawan Language)"

May 2016 "Okinawa Performing Arts"

June 2016 "Haari and obon"

July 2016 "Living Ryukyuan textiles of Okinawa"

September 2016: "LooChoo identity through music"

October 2016: "The Art of Okinawan dance"

November 2016: "Uchinaanchu Taikai experiences"

January 2017: "Uchinaa New Year"

February 2017: "Mimi-gusui: Life Sustenance Through the Ears"

March 2017: "Defining moments in Ryukyuan history"

April 2017: "Imi – Seeking Our Dreams For Future Generations"

May 2017: "Uchinaa Kwacchi (Okinawan Foods)"

June 2017 "45th Anniversary of Okinawa's reversion – Okinawa yesterday and today"

July 2017 "Yeisaa (Eisa) and Yaeyama Obon practices"

Aug 2017: "Okinawa Spirituality and Sacred Sites"

September 2017: “LooChoo Hairstyles and Clothing”  
 October 2017: “Sanshin Anatomy 101”  
 November 2017 “Uchinaanchu Identity”  
 January 2018 “Loochoo history through music: Edo Nobori”  
 February 2018 “Okinawa New Year”  
 March 2018 “Defining Shimanchu: Unity and Diversity of Loochoo People”  
 April 2018 “Defining Shimanchu: Unity and Diversity of Loochoo People”  
 May 2018 “Cultural Integrity in the Taketomi Island of Yaeyama: from the past to the present”  
 June 2018 “Katachiki, or Bingata stencil dyed fabric”  
 July 2018 “Obon and Haari”

As it can be seen from these themes, these workshops aim to provide information and insights for the local Okinawan diaspora in order to deepen their understanding as well as the tie with their ancestral homeland.

#### 2.4. The participants

The participants range in age from children to elders. While the majority are middle-aged and older, students from University of Hawai‘i at Hilo including exchange students from Okinawa consistently participate as well. While the workshops are somewhat geared toward Hawai‘i uchinānchu and the majority of them are from that group, anybody is welcome and it is free of charge. Many people who live in Hilo, eastern side of island of Hawai‘i, attend the workshops but residents of Kona, western side of Hawai‘i Island, drive more than an hour and half to attend the workshop. The number of participants varies month to month, but often hovers around 40. The largest number of participants was 55.

#### 2.5. Other workshops in Hawai‘i

Besides the LooChoo Studies workshops at the University of Hawai‘i at Hilo, the members of Ukwanshin Kabudan hold other various workshops, classes, and study trips. For instance, on Maui Island, Eric and Norman hold a monthly workshop. Norman focuses on sanshin and singing, and Eric teaches dance, flute, shimakutuba and lion and dragon dance. Keith Nakaganeku, another important member of Ukwanshin Kabudan, teaches classes once a month in Waikoloa on the Island of Hawai‘i. In Honolulu, O‘ahu, they hold twice a month shimakutuba classes and a weekly sanshin class. From 2007, Eric and Norman started a monthly lecture series, and by 2009 started doing classes and workshops including shimakutuba classes.

### 3. LooChoo Identity Conferences

The LooChoo Identity Conference (also LooChoo Identity Summit) is a three-day conference held by Ukwanshin Kabudan. As the name suggests, the purpose is to connect Okinawans (whether they be the diaspora or from Okinawa itself) with an identity distinct from that of mainland Japan. With assistance from many community members and volunteers, these conferences are held once a year in March. Occurring since 2015, the summits usually alternate between the different Hawaiian islands. The structure of the conference generally has the following components:

1. a large presentation or skit to the entire body of participants
2. breakup into small, assigned groups, where moderators ask questions about the presentation or skit and a recorder writes down the responses
3. return to the main conference hall where each group takes turns sharing their discussions

Each conference or summit has its own theme that directs the various presentations and skits that the small groups discuss. These themes themselves are guided by a phrase or word in *uchināguchi* in order to highlight the relationship between language and identity. The themes for each, as well as which island hosted that year, are listed below.

Maui 2015, Ninufwa Bushi Mii Ati - Looking to the North Star to Revitalize our  
Okinawan Culture for the Future

O'ahu 2016, Fichi Ukiin: Our Responsibility, Our Kuleana

O'ahu 2017, 'Imi: Seeking our dreams

Hawai'i 2018, Kataibusan: Sustaining the breath of our native languages

O'ahu 2019, Washiraran: Never forget

Based on our experience of participating in two of these conferences, we can say that the goals of these conferences are to deepen the relationship among the Okinawan diaspora who reside not only in Hawai'i but all over the world, and to strengthen the relationship between the Okinawan diaspora and people who currently live in Okinawa. They also offer the opportunities for every participant to question their own cultural identity and to explore a role that they can play in deepening and strengthening the relationship among *uchinānchu* world wide.

### 4. Education tours to Okinawa

About 10 years ago, Norman and Eric started to conduct a cultural study trip once a year. They take a group of Hawaiian Okinawans to Okinawa where they visit several significant sites and people to learn about Okinawan culture and history. Currently they are planning to have a cultural trip for people from Okinawa to come to Hawai'i and learn about Hawaiian culture and language revitalization. We will focus on the tour conducted in 2016 where three professors and one curriculum developer from Ka Haka Ula o Ke'elikōlani joined Eric Wada and Norman Kaneshiro and other Okinawans from Hawai'i. The tour also included attending the Sixth Worldwide Uchinānchu Taikai which took place in Naha that year. These four representatives from the college were carefully chosen and two of them, including the dean of the college, have Okinawan ancestry and one was the former dean of the college. The last one, one of the authors of this paper, was chosen for her ability to interpret among three languages, Hawaiian, English, and Japanese.

During the tour, the faculty of the college actively participated in a symposium, conference, and concert. Government officials, teacher representatives, elders and student representatives on language revitalization attended the symposium, where we discussed the following:

1. how Hawaiian language was brought in to the education system
2. how the Hawaiian revitalization movement got the attention of the government
3. how language education in academia is important and connects to the performing arts and protocols

In this indigenous language conference which was sponsored by Ryukyu University, the focus of the talk was what makes revitalization successful and each of the representatives shared their experiences and opinions. The topics for the conference were as follows:

1. what has Ka Haka 'Ula o Ke'elikōlani at University of Hawai'i at Hilo done to preserve and revitalize Hawaiian language?
2. why and how the program was started?
3. how training is done for language teachers?
4. what you do as a speaker of Hawaiian in your daily life and what you do with your children to perpetuate the language at home?
5. what it means to speak and normalize the language?

6. what are the connections of language and culture?

There was also a concert titled “IMI ~ Seeking One’s Self Through Dreams that Cross the Ocean” where there were video interviews of the people of Ka Haka ‘Ula, Hawaiian and Okinawan dances and songs. Those professors performed ‘oli ‘chanting’ and hula.

## 5. Discussion

Often, language revitalization is a grassroots effort to take back an ancestral language (cf. Oberly et al. 2015, Cru 2015) and what we have described above are definitely grassroots movements initiated by the Okinawan diaspora in Hawai‘i. It is estimated that there are 420,000 Uchinānchu immigrants and their descendants in the world, which is approximately 40% of the current population of Okinawa. In Hawai‘i, it is common for people to refer themselves as Okinawan instead of Japanese. For instance, an article titled “Hawai‘i rainbow of cultures and how they got to the islands” in a local magazine pointed out three distinct groups of people who migrated to Hawai‘i: Chinese, Japanese, Portuguese, Hawaiian, Filipinos, Koreans, and Okinawans. “Okinawa is the southernmost prefecture of Japan, comprised of hundreds of islands, but Okinawans in Hawaii rarely refer to themselves as Japanese. They are Okinawans, or Uchinanchu, and proud of the distinction” (Fox 2017). Scholars such as Shiramizu (2013) indicate that this distinction became more popular in early 1980’s with strong influence from the civil rights movement of the 1950’s and 60’s. Thus, it can be asserted that Uchinānchu in Hawai‘i are a more cohesive group than more general “Japanese-Americans” and many of them have strong interest in issues concerning Okinawa including the linguistic and cultural issues.

## 6. Conclusion

As language shift occurred in Okinawa in the 20th century, Okinawan associations such as Hawai‘i United Okinawa Association sprung up in the diaspora. When Okinawans in Okinawa began shifting to a common Japanese identity during the support of reversion in the 1960s, their cousins in Hawai‘i were seeking ways to connect to their Ryukyuan roots. These efforts continue to this day, most notably in the form of the inter-island LooChoo Studies workshops and the annual LooChoo Identity Summit. While these events focus more on building an Okinawan identity for the diaspora, this of course includes language. Efforts for revitalization are growing in Okinawa itself and at the same time the diaspora in Hawai‘i has been making conscious



efforts to remedy the situation. The workshops allow the diaspora to learn about their ancestral background, compounded by the language, to the point where they call themselves “Okinawan-Americans/Okinawan-Hawaiians” rather than “Japanese-American”. Furthermore, the annual summits provide an arena for discussion among different communities on problem solving efforts for Okinawa. Since the context is Hawai‘i, these brainstorming usually involve inspiration from the Hawaiian revitalization movement. The leaders of this movement themselves even attended the Sixth Worldwide Uchinaanchu Taikai in 2016, with their own symposiums, in an attempt to demonstrate the successes of revitalization in Hawai‘i. With governmental and educational bodies in attendance as well as sponsoring, the Taikai served as a study session, one that spectators hopefully took valuable knowledge away from. As pointed out by Hinton et al (2018), the goal and purpose of revitalizing varies according to a language; however, sharing remarkable historical and political parallels, the Hawaiian revitalization movement, with over thirty years of actual experience, can definitely reveal some of the possible outcomes of revitalization for the Okinawan people. As times are politically troubling for Okinawa, as revitalization grows in popularity but lacks the proper society-wide commitment and support, the Okinawans in Hawai‘i, with a renewed sense of identity, are active in language and culture revitalization from islands afar, yet islands nonetheless.

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